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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
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INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000298

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STATE FOR NEA/FO (GRAY AND PATTON), NEA/PI, NEA/MAG (HARRIS  
AND HOPKINS) AND DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/22/2017

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: BEN ALI EASES PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDACY RESTRICTIONS

REF: A. TUNIS 278

[1](#)B. TUNIS 144

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In a March 21 speech, President Ben Ali announced a constitutional amendment that will allow more opposition party candidates to run in the 2009 presidential elections. Ben Ali proposed that the head of each political party can run for president provided he/she had been elected and held office for more than two years. While positive on the surface, the amendment would effectively block the only announced candidate, former PDP Secretary General Nejib Chebbi. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) In a March 21 speech commemorating Tunisian Independence Day, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali proposed a draft constitutional amendment that would lower the voting age to 18 (as announced on November 7, 2007) and facilitate the Presidential candidacy of opposition party leaders. Specifically, Ben Ali said, "In our endeavor to widen the possibilities for pluralism of Presidential candidates, and in the case that the candidate cannot present the minimum number of deputies or municipality presidents as outlined in article 40 of the constitution, we will insert a draft amendment -- an exception for the 2009 presidential elections -- that will also allow the presidential candidacy of the senior official of each political party, be he president, secretary general or first secretary of his party, provided

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that he was elected to that authority and that, on the day his candidacy is presented, he was elected not less than two consecutive years ago."

[1](#)3. (C) On the surface, Ben Ali's proposed amendment is positive. The 2004 elections specific law was criticized for effectively preventing independent opposition party candidates, as it requires that each presidential candidate garner the support of 30 members of parliament or local mayors. Since the majority of these politicians are affiliated with the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), even loyal opposition candidates have faced difficulty becoming candidates (Ref A). However, Ben Ali's announced amendment effectively blocks the candidacy of Nejib Chebbi, the candidate of the independent Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). Chebbi, who announced his candidacy in February (Ref B), had publicly called for simplification of elections regulations to allow for his candidacy and had begun small campaign events across Tunisia. The announcement may also prevent Mustapha Ben Jaafar, the Secretary General of the other independent political party, the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL), from running as he was not formally elected by his party. The FDTL and the PDP are generally considered to be the two most independent

opposition parties. Of these two parties, the only eligible candidate given the new requirements is PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi.

14. (C) Tunisian civil society has been quick to react to Ben Ali's announcement. Some were positive, noting that Jribi could be the first woman to run for President of Tunisia. Others commented that the speech proves Ben Ali fears Chebbi's popularity. Chebbi himself reportedly commented that the law was specifically designed to exclude him, which is "unacceptable." Jribi told PolOff on March 24 that the PDP would hold a press conference on March 25 to announce their reaction to Ben Ali's speech. Ben Jaafar said he was also preparing a press statement. The Ambassador will meet with Jribi, Chebbi, and Ben Jaafar and other party officials and intellectuals on March 28 to discuss their views on Ben Ali's announcement.

15. (C) Comment. While the simplification of candidacy procedures was much needed, Ben Ali's announcement seems to be timed and scripted to stop Chebbi's campaign in its tracks. Ben Ali is clearly expected to win by a large margin in 2009, but many hoped he could be encouraged to create a more level playing field for opposition candidates. By announcing this amendment so early in the process, Ben Ali has effectively eliminated Chebbi and closed the door to further reforms that might empower opposition candidates.  
End Comment.

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